

**Buffalo-Red River Watershed District
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**Testimony of
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**Presented to the
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Introduction

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am Bruce E. Albright, Administrator for the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District, headquartered in Barnesville, Minnesota. Our District covers 1,380 square miles, located in parts of four counties in northwestern Minnesota. I've served as the District's Administrator since 1980. In 1995, I was the recipient of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Certificate of Merit for Outstanding Conservation Cooperation and Application Assistance from State Conservationist William Hunt. I hope my credentials demonstrate the types of relationships that can be developed between Watershed Districts and the USDA.

The Buffalo-Red River Watershed District was formed in 1976 as a political subdivision of the State of Minnesota to address flooding problems. Our District is the drainage authority for 69 legal drainage systems, totaling over 400 miles in length, and to date has developed 60 projects to address drainage, flooding, natural resource enhancement, and water quality concerns. Our District is similar to other areas in the Red River Valley, located in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Canada. Since 1993, our area has been in an extremely wet hydrologic cycle, and most of you probably have heard about our 1997 devastating spring flood. We work closely with agencies that make up our Mediation Project Team, including, but not limited to, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD), and local landowners and interest groups to implement Watershed Programs made available by the USDA. Sometimes, these projects have international impacts. We are very appreciative of the opportunity to appear before you today.

Watersheds Defined

The National Watershed Coalition has defined watersheds across the nation as the "land that water flows across or under on its way to a stream, river, or lake." Our landscapes are made up of numerous interconnected basins, or watersheds. Within each watershed, all water runs to the lowest point—a stream, river, or lake. Large watersheds, like the ones for the Mississippi River, Columbia River, and Red River of the North, are made up of many smaller watersheds that can cross several

states. Watersheds come in various shapes and sizes, and have many different features. Everyone lives in and belongs to a watershed community. Natural resource activities, whether good or bad, can have an effect on the soil, water, air, plants, and animals in a watershed. Minnesota has the unique distinction of being the headwaters of three major watershed systems: the Mississippi River, the Great Lakes, and the Red-Rainy River. This distinction also entails the obligation to manage these waters responsibly, acknowledging downstream interests. This obligation cannot be borne solely by Minnesota, but is a responsibility that can be shared through a partnership with local governments, landowners, and the Federal government, particularly USDA.

Agency Cooperation

NRCS has been “a partner in conservation since 1935”. That’s seven decades of helping people help the land. The work of local watersheds can be greatly enhanced by forming partnerships with USDA, but we need your help to make Watershed Programs available. These partnerships extend beyond individual landowners to the state and local governments, as well as private organizations. In line with President Bush’s Cooperative Conservation Initiative, we all look for opportunities to work with others to avoid duplication, leverage resources, and accomplish mutual environmental goals.

With Watershed Planning (PL-566), NRCS has embarked on a major effort, called “locally-led conservation”, which is an extension of the agency’s traditional assistance to individual farmers and ranchers for planning and installing conservation practices for soil erosion, water management, and other purposes. It means that local people, generally with the leadership of a conservation district, or in our particular case, a watershed district, along with NRCS technical assistance, will assess natural resource conditions and needs; set goals; identify ways to solve resource problems; and utilize a broad array of projects/programs to implement solutions; and measure their success.

The desire for assistance is clearly expressed through the growth of a nationwide “watershed movement.” Local people want to protect and be stewards of their land and water resources. They recognize the need to work together to plan and implement solutions to their resource problems. People now understand that what they do on their land can affect others, and they need to “think globally and act locally”, or as we like to say in Minnesota, “think globally, act watershed.”

Farmers and ranchers have sought NRCS technology and planning expertise for the past 60 plus years. Watershed associations, conservation districts, irrigation districts, watershed improvement districts, and other groups will continue to seek the best available science and planning skills to assist them to assess their natural resource conditions and help identify local solutions to problems. USDA can assist in this regard through Watershed Programs.

The Buffalo-Red River Watershed District recognizes that we all need to use our tax dollars wisely. This fact makes the work of this Subcommittee very important. It also highlights the importance of continuing those federal programs that provide the most benefit to society in general. Watershed Programs, as administered by the USDA and NRCS, are proven methods to protect, enhance, or restore our nation’s vital natural resources, which are critical to our very survival. The “watershed concept” offers a complete management approach to these issues. This approach not only provides cost effective solutions through PL-566, but by combining this effort with watershed planning, we can make more effective use of all programs by finding reasonable solutions to specific watershed level problems.

NRCS Watershed Programs are more important now than ever for Minnesota and the other States in our Nation. The flooding and water quality issues today are watershed oriented and can only be addressed in a watershed context.

Minnesota State Issues

Minnesota currently has four (4) active PL-566 projects, which include:

1.) The Snake River flood prevention project, which was authorized in 2000, and should be completed in 2006, will provide flood protection for the City of Warren and productive agricultural lands. The long-term economic benefits, both urban and rural, would not have been realized without the partnership afforded by the PL-566 program. Project sponsors include the City of Warren and the Middle River-Snake River Watershed District. The project area covers 166,400 acres. The total estimated project costs are \$12,283,700.

2.) The Kanaranzi-Little Rock water quality project, authorized in 1988, has made limited progress due to an unfunded federal commitment of \$780,000. This area has an immediate need for \$293,000 in financial and technical assistance to make real progress in addressing the water quality needs of this watershed. As the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) continues to push for assessment and designation of impaired waters, local landowners are put at an increased risk of water quality degradation because of funding shortfalls. Landowners, state, and local governments are willing to hold up their end of the commitment. It's time for the Federal Government to accelerate funding to meet at least the immediate needs of this project.

3.) The Whitewater River water quality project was authorized in 1998. The unfunded federal commitment is \$1,127,400. This area has an immediate financial and technical assistance need of \$750,000. Local landowners, with state and local governments are ready and willing to proceed. Realizing progress however requires increased financial and technical assistance to meet the USDA's commitments to this project. In the end, the losers are not only the landowners, but society in general, who are put at greater risk due to water quality impairments; diminished fish and wildlife resources, diminished public recreational resources, and local community water supplies that continue to be threatened as source water protection areas go unprotected. It will take full participation and commitment from all partners to fulfill commitments for this project.

4.) The Bear Creek water quality project, which covers 34,990 acres in southeast Minnesota and northwest Iowa, was authorized for planning in 1995, and approved for operations in 1998. The project has an unfunded commitment in Minnesota of \$240,000 and an immediate need of \$30,000.

Minnesota also has two PL-566 projects in the planning stage:

- 1.) The Campbell/Rice Lake project focuses on assessing and developing plans to address water quality issues in the City of Detroit Lakes, located in Becker County. This plan addresses a complex problem of soil chemistry and phosphorous mineralization not solvable at the farm or individual level.
- 2.) The Two River Watershed District-Spring Brook Township project focuses on agricultural flooding and stream restoration. This project will provide flood protection of cropland and also offers significant ecological restoration of a riparian area.

Both of these planning projects are the outgrowths of the Red River Mediation process that has brought federal, state, local government, landowners, and conservation groups together to solve problems. Balancing natural resource enhancements, flood prevention, and water quality improvement is a win-win situation for everyone. USDA Watershed Programs are unique tools to help address these types of issues and needs in both a small and large watershed context. Meeting federal water quality mandates and reducing federal expenditures in response to flood disasters, cannot be realized without a renewed commitment to USDA's Watershed Program funding. There is a great need for short-term funding to address the immediate needs of these projects and planning efforts; and for long-term funding to restore and revitalize the federal financial and technical assistance commitment to the watershed model for water quality and quantity management.

Budget trends at the federal level for the last three years for these types of programs are below what's needed, with significant reductions proposed for the future. In the Whitewater Watershed in southeastern Minnesota, they have six applicants who are waiting for funding to do projects such as rotational grazing and terraces; erosion control; grassed waterways, sediment basins; and grade stabilization structures. Likewise in the Kanaranzi Little-Rock watershed, they have twelve pending applications in need of \$300,000 of federal cost sharing. If there is this kind of interest for a program with very little or no funding, just think of what we could do if we had more financial support from the federal government.

Problem Identification

The USDA has many good programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), and the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), to name a few. But many times, protection programs are not enough to address problems that have developed over an extended period of time. Local agencies and landowners need USDA Watershed Programs to first analyze, plan, and restore our resources, and then we can apply the aforementioned programs to protect and enhance these resources. The aggressiveness of the federal water quality mandates and lack of resources to complete TMDL studies that will direct water quality restorations continue to put urban and rural communities and production agriculture at great economic risk. Current litigation in Minnesota has stopped expansion of public infrastructure to enhance waste treatment facilities for the City of Annandale, with implications that could impact the entire Mississippi watershed, or 68% of the State. In addition, impaired waters designations have stopped maintenance and repair of a county ditch system in Aitkin County. Solving the nation's water quality and quantity problems requires a real commitment to a federal, state, local governments and landowner partnership. The USDA's Watershed Programs can play a vital partnership role if there is a renewed goal to fund current federal obligations and commitments and by accelerating resources to future watershed planning and implementation.

In the 1950s, the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District had several PL-566 areas where planning was terminated, including the Deerhorn-Buffalo, the South of Hawley-South Buffalo, and Comstock Coulee projects. The problems identified at that time, have not gone away. The Comstock Coulee watershed has a drainage area of approximately 105 square miles in Clay and Wilkin Counties. The Coulee is a direct tributary to the Red River of the North, where the MPCA and the EPA have identified impaired reaches in Minnesota for turbidity, low oxygen, and fecal coliform. The Cities of Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota, both have raw water intakes for their public water supplies located immediately downstream of the Coulee outlet. These communities rely on the Red River of the North to furnish water to growing communities, whose

population base is currently in excess of 200,000 people. Private cultivated land comprises 95% of this watershed. The NRCS, formerly called the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), first became involved in this area as a potential PL-566 project in 1963. The initial analysis was for assistance in addressing problems associated with flooding, grade stabilization, soil erosion, and protecting a farm crossing. Landowners recognized the need to address these problems at a watershed level rather than as individuals. An application for USDA assistance through the PL-566 program was made on April 26, 1966. On April 18, 1984, the application was withdrawn, partially because the USDA had no funding for this type of project, even though earlier opinions were that a watershed plan for this area would be beneficial and would yield benefits in excess of the costs. In 2005, the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District has held two meetings with landowners in this area to discuss the same concerns that were raised 40 years ago.

Committee Members, the problems identified in 1963 for the Comstock Coulee area have not gone away, but have only worsened. With a growing population base downstream who demands high-quality water, the issues are more pertinent now, then ever.

Conclusions

I'm here today from northwest Minnesota to hopefully show you that that by working together, at the federal, state, and local level with our farmers and ranchers, we can address the types of conservation problems and issues identified for Comstock Coulee, as well as other areas within the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District, the State of Minnesota, and our great Nation. Partnerships can be formed that will not only identify, but also solve our natural resource problems. The Federal Government needs to be a part of that solution by funding Watershed Programs through the USDA. I can personally assure this Committee that most landowners are ready, willing, and able to participate in the solution to these problems, but they need your assistance to make these individual projects a reality. The landowners' role will be to provide the long term stewardship needed for these valuable resources, and the USDA's role is to make it possible for them to realize their goals by funding projects that will protect, restore, and enhance our natural resources for this and future generations.

Again, we appreciate the Sub-Committee's invitation to bring our views, concerns, and suggestions about Watershed Programs to this hearing.